

203hh- The Truth About The Five Hindrances

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(Summarised transcription of a Hillside Hermitage Dhamma talk)

“Monks, there are these five hindrances. Which five? Sensual desire as a hindrance, ill will as a hindrance, sloth & drowsiness as a hindrance, restlessness & anxiety as a hindrance, and doubt as a hindrance. These are the five hindrances.” - AN 9.64

The first thing to do is to clear up what the hindrances are not. They are not things that arise occasionally in you and they are not only present when your mind is attending to them. Hindrances in themselves are on the level of your currently enduring existence as a whole, as a basis for your world.

Only when samadhi is developed to the extent of jhana, has the mind overcome hindrances, everything else in your day to day life, even if you are not necessarily gripped by particular manifestations of lust, anger, and confusion, are still within the domain of the hindrances. They are on the level of your existential situation, and by that, I mean that at any given time you are either lustful or liable to lust, either irritable or liable to irritation, and so on. In other words, it's not like there are these five separate hindrances, rather, fundamentally you are within the domain of hindrances which is one thing. In the same sense, there are the five aggregates and then on account of the five aggregates as a whole, you can discern each of them. The same principle applies to the five hindrances which are the basis of an undeveloped, unenlightened mind. That base is exemplified and manifested through one example at a time or the liability through one of them at a time. That's why surmounting the hindrances equals surmounting the world.

The first jhana is like surmounting the entire existential situation whereby now you are withdrawn and safe from lust and liability to lust and so on. This is important because as long as people think that hindrances are these things that come and go, then all you need to do to deal with them is to just manage the unwholesome state while it's there, but if you start understanding that the hindrances are on the level of “my situation already as it is, even if I do not discern any specific hindrance, I am already within the hindrances”, then that will force you to broaden your context more and more until you reach that supreme safety from hindrances which is the first jhana. Not because the hindrances don't arise, the Buddha doesn't mean that joys and griefs don't arise in the world. No, he meant that you surmount those things which are there, the domain of joy, grief, and five hindrances are there but you have surmounted them. Just because you don't have any issues currently arising doesn't mean that you are entering the jhana, No, that's still well in the domain of the hindrances.

Liability To Being Hindered

One way to surmount the domain of the hindrances would be to reflect: “Is there arisen lust in me or can non-arisen lust arise?”. You have to include that liability to lust as a hindrance already because you might not have any arisen lust now but since you are liable to lust arising, that means the hindrance is present. It's foolish to think that just because it's not presently active, that you are free from lust. If you are liable then you are not free. The liability is part of the hindrance.

Even if you are not sure whether you are liable to lust, that means that the hindrance of doubt or lack of clarity is there. If you have abandoned lust, you will be clear about it. If you are liable to one hindrance you are liable to them all. There are five hindrances, not three and a half or two, it's always the five different ways that you can be hindered.

If you start thinking of them, not as individual things that occasionally arise but start seeing that your world is within them, even your sense restraint and “dhamma practice” is within the five hindrances. The only time you won't be within them is in the first jhana, that is why the one who surmounts them abides in the joy of seclusion from unwholesome states.

At Venāgapura, An.3.63: “...But, Master Gotama, what is the celestial high and luxurious bed that at present you gain at will, without trouble or difficulty?”

“Here, brahmin, when I am dwelling in dependence on a village or town, in the morning I dress, take my bowl and robe, and enter that village or town for alms. After the meal, when I have returned from the alms round, I enter a grove. I collect some grass or leaves that I find there into a pile and then sit down. Having folded my legs crosswise and straightened my body, I bring mindfulness to the fore. Then, secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states, I enter and dwell in the first jhāna,...

“Then, brahmin, when I am in such a state, if I walk back and forth, on that occasion my walking back and forth is celestial. If I am standing, on that occasion my standing is celestial. If I am sitting, on that occasion my sitting is celestial. If I lie down, on that occasion this is my celestial high and luxurious bed. This is that celestial high and luxurious bed that at present I can gain at will, without trouble or difficulty.”

The Five Hindrances Are One In Unwholesomeness.

The first step to getting secluded is to see the hindrances for what they are, not just managing occasional flurries of worry, irritation, lustful thoughts, and so on. No, you need to see that all of that is happening within the context of the five hindrances. Liability to them means that they are there, otherwise, you wouldn't be liable to them. If you start thinking like that and depending on how much effort you make you will get to see that you are not responsible for the hindrances arising but you are responsible for them hindering you. You are the one that takes them up ignorantly, but that is not on the level of a choice, as in you cannot just choose not to take up the hindrances, it's more like, sometimes you choose to do something that results in you being unable to not take them. So if you stop thinking of them individually but see them as one then it

doesn't matter what hindrance is there, your attitude towards any hindrance is what you start to concern yourself with, instead of trying to manage hindrance through asubha or metta and so on.

It doesn't matter which hindrance it is, an unwholesome state is present, so what is your attitude towards that? In that way, you can practice freedom from the hindrances by practicing the discernment of your liability to the unwholesome.

That's what all hindrances have in common, they are all unwholesome. So why are you liable to unwholesome states? The answer is quite simple, it's because some of those states you don't see as unwholesome and you willingly delight, entertain, welcome, and act out of them. That's the gateway we speak about, that you willingly turn a blind eye to. To the extent, you can ignore the gateway to that extent the hindrances will find a way to get in.

The Chief Hindrance And The Foremost Danger.

What is the chief hindrance on account of which people let the other four hindrances in? It's sensuality, and not seeing the danger in sensuality is not seeing the danger based on the five hindrances, and because of that, when a hindrance comes that you don't want, you will not be able to not be involved because your core practice up to that point was to be involved with the hindrances by choice, through welcoming sensuality in your thoughts (opening the gate), delighting in it and above all not seeing the danger. That's also where the crux of that recognition of danger is, in other words, the danger in sensuality is not that later on things will not work out or things will be too much to manage and thus sensuality is not good. No, even before you engage in sensuality, the danger is in not seeing the danger in your welcoming of sensuality which brings with it the liability to the other four hindrances. Through willingly entertaining sensuality you are willingly accepting anxiety, worry, fear, dullness, depression, confusion, and everything else that comes with it. If the danger of that can become apparent, you will see that even the prospect of sensuality is dangerous. (In other words, there are drawbacks of sensuality but that which makes you liable to the drawbacks is your desire and lust, which is the main danger.)

Magandiya Sutta, MN.75: "Magandiya, suppose that there was a leper covered with sores and infections, devoured by worms, picking the scabs off the openings of his wounds with his nails, cauterizing his body over a pit of glowing embers. His friends, companions, & relatives would take him to a doctor. The doctor would concoct medicine for him, and thanks to the medicine he would be cured of his leprosy: well & happy, free, master of himself, going wherever he liked. Then suppose two strong men, having grabbed him with their arms, were to drag him to a pit of glowing embers. What do you think? Wouldn't he twist his body this way & that?"

"Yes, Master Gotama. Why is that? The fire is painful to the touch, very hot & scorching."

"Now what do you think, Magandiya? Is the fire painful to the touch, very hot & scorching, only now, or was it also that way before?"

"Both now & before is it painful to the touch, very hot & scorching, master Gotama. It's just that when the man was a leper covered with sores and infections, devoured by worms, picking the scabs off the openings of his wounds with his nails, his faculties were impaired, which was why, even though the fire was actually painful to the touch, he had the skewed perception of 'pleasant.'"

"In the same way, Magandiya, sensual pleasures in the past were painful to the touch, very hot & scorching; sensual pleasures in the future will be painful to the touch, very hot & scorching; sensual pleasures at present are painful to the touch, very hot & scorching; but when beings are not free from passion for sensual pleasures — devoured by sensual craving, burning with sensual fever — their faculties are impaired, which is why, even though sensual pleasures are actually painful to the touch, they have the skewed perception of 'pleasant...'"

By seeing the connection between welcoming sensuality and the implicit weight of the danger(drawbacks) that is hidden in that welcoming, you will then realize that no amount of sensuality is worth accepting for that risk, and therefore the danger becomes apparent.

Theragatha, 5.1 Rājadatta:

"I, a monk, went to a charnel ground, And saw a woman left there,
Discarded in a cemetery, Full of worms that devoured her.
Some men were disgusted, Seeing her dead and rotten;
But sexual desire arose in me, I was as if blind to her oozing body.
Quicker than the boiling of rice, I left that place,
Mindful and aware, I sat down to one side.
Then the realization, Came upon me—
The danger became apparent, And I was firmly repulsed.
Then my mind was liberated— See the excellence of the Dhamma!
I've attained the three knowledges, And fulfilled the Buddha's instructions."

People do not see the connection between the perils that they are exposed to and the entrance for those perils being their acceptance of sensuality, because if they do see the connection, then that great danger will become apparent. The only reason a person keeps engaging in sensuality is that they do not see the danger of it.

It's Entirely Up To You.

Mahā Assapura Sutta , MN.39: "...when these five hindrances are unabandoned in himself, a bhikkhu sees them respectively as a debt, a disease, a prison, slavery, and a road across a desert. But when these five hindrances have been abandoned in himself, he sees that as freedom from debt, health, release from prison, freedom from slavery, and a land of safety. "Having abandoned these five hindrances, imperfections of the mind that weaken wisdom, quite secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states, he enters upon and abides in the first jhāna,.."

That sense of safety and relief does not come from ‘nobody knocking on your door and threatening you’(the absence of a hindrance), it comes from not welcoming sensuality through which no liability of other hindrances can apply to you, and the reason why this is so great and wholesome is because it's entirely up to you. Welcoming sensuality or not doesn't depend on the circumstances, you can always say no to welcoming sensuality on the level of your thoughts (the gateway). What is your attitude when the thought of sensuality arises? Do you see it as agreeable, friendly, dear to you, not dangerous and entertaining or do you see it as “this is the entrance” for eons of suffering (the welcoming of sensuality)?

Practically speaking, the other four hindrances will torment you sooner or later, all because you don't see the danger in sensuality, you don't see the bait as the bait, you don't see the hook inside.

For the uprooting of the domain of the five hindrances, you need to see the implicit danger waiting before you even engage, not while you're engaging or afterward when you feel bad.

Sammāsa Sutta, SN.12:66: “...Whatever ascetics and brahmins at present regard that in the world with a pleasant and agreeable nature as permanent, as happiness, as self, as healthy, as secure: they are nurturing craving. In nurturing craving they are nurturing acquisition. In nurturing acquisition they are nurturing suffering. In nurturing suffering they are not freed from birth, aging, and death; they are not freed from sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair; they are not freed from suffering, I say.”

“Suppose, bhikkhus, there was a bronze cup of a beverage having a fine color, aroma, and taste, but it was mixed with poison. Then a man would come along, oppressed and afflicted by the heat, tired, parched, and thirsty. They would tell him: ‘Good man, this beverage in the bronze cup has a fine color, aroma, and taste, but it is mixed with poison. Drink it if you wish. If you drink it, it will gratify you with its color, aroma, and taste, but by drinking it you will meet death or deadly suffering.’ Suddenly, without reflecting, he would drink the beverage—he would not reject it—and thereby he would meet death or deadly suffering.”

“So too, bhikkhus, whatever ascetics and brahmins in the past ... in the future ... at present regard that in the world with a pleasant and agreeable nature as permanent, as happiness, as self, as healthy, as secure: they are nurturing craving. In nurturing craving ... they are not freed from suffering, I say...”

When you have thoughts of sensuality you need to start seeing them as bait and then that's how you will become unable to welcome it. You cannot just choose to not welcome sensuality, that's impossible, but if you contemplate the danger in it then you realize that your welcoming will start to fade because the only reason why you used to welcome it, is because you never saw what it implies, you never saw its full significance right there and then, not later. When the danger becomes apparent, you will understand the extent of gratification, and then you will understand the extent of escape. You will know that if you keep contemplating the danger, you will know that the gratification which is your welcoming and delight in the prospect of sensuality, will fade and that will be the full escape from this.

Don't confuse the not seeing of sensual thought with not having sensual thoughts, that's not the same thing. You will have thoughts towards sensuality and that's where you see the peril, but that doesn't mean that you have no thoughts of sensuality arising or that the significance of sensual joy has disappeared. No, that stays, that's why, you surmount it, not prevent it from arising. If you have surmounted it for a long period, it will eventually stop arising on its own, not because you stopped it.

Seeing the danger in 'delighting in the prospect of pleasure', that insight is not painful, it's neutral. Getting pleasure or not is on the level of pain, but seeing the danger before you engage in pleasure is not painful, it's eye-opening.